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C O N F I D E N T I A L TOKYO 003623

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2026
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EWWT](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [KS](#) [JA](#)
SUBJECT: LIANCOURT ROCKS: GOJ TO RESPOND TO ROKG DISPATCH
OF RESEARCH VESSEL TO DISPUTED WATERS

REF: TOKYO 2221

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Joe Donovan. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

11. (C) Charge Donovan met June 29 with MOFA Asian Affairs DG Sasae at Sasae's request. Sasae stated that:

-- the ROKG has rejected Japan's proposals to establish a mechanism to allow access to dispute territorial waters;

-- the ROKG would dispatch a research vessel to disputed waters on July 3;

-- Japan will respond by sending first a Coast Guard patrol ship to dissuade the ROK vessel, followed by its own research vessel;

-- he expects a stronger negative public reaction than at the time of the April incident;

-- he fears Japan-ROK bilateral relations will be "tremendously damaged" at a time cooperation and collaboration are needed to deal with the DPRK; and,

-- he asked for U.S. understanding of Japan's position.

The Charge commended Japan for showing restraint to date and strongly encouraged it to continue to do so and to look for ways for both sides to show flexibility in managing the issue. End summary.

12. (C) Charge Donovan met June 29 with MOFA Asian Affairs Director General Kenichiro Sasae, at Sasae's request, to hear MOFA's explanation of the current status of the territorial dispute with the ROK. Sasae recalled the April dispute surrounding Japan's plans to send a Japanese survey vessel to disputed waters and subsequent negotiations that resulted in a temporary solution (reftel). Now, the ROK will dispatch its own survey ship to disputed waters on July 3, he said. At the talks on EEZ demarcation and at other venues, Sasae noted, Japan had proposed the establishment of a mechanism that would "smooth the entry into the disputed waters" by both sides, but the ROK had rejected all proposals, he claimed. Seoul had asked Tokyo to "remain silent" while it could make an "appropriate decision." Tokyo had complied, Sasae said, and not raised the matter publicly.

12. (C) In January, Sasae related, the ROK had first announced its plans to conduct oceanographic surveys later in the year. Foreign Minister Aso had raised his concerns about the planned survey during conversations with ROK FM Ban Ki-moon

in late May at Doha and more recently in telephone conversations regarding the DPRK missile launch preparations. Ban said he would "do his best" and asked Japan to keep a low profile on the matter, Sasae stated. ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade seems to be making its best efforts to work with President Roh, Sasae opined, but his sources indicate that the decision was made today, June 29, to dispatch the survey ship on July 3.

13. (C) Japan is very concerned about this development and regrets this ROK decision, Sasae stated. Japan has been working to "manage" the ROK-Japan relationship, but it cannot sit back and not register its own protests. Japan will likely send its own Coast Guard vessels to warn the ROK survey ship not to proceed. It may also send its own research vessel. Japan has been patient and kept a low profile, he stressed, but that approach has not brought the results Japan had hoped for. If the ROK research vessel does depart port on July 3, Japan expects it to make its way slowly toward Takeshima/Dokdo/Liancourt Islands, arriving there on about July 11. Bilateral tensions will rise tremendously during that period and the situation will be even worse than in April, Sasae predicted. In April, Japan had initiated the action and then halted. This time, the ROK will instigate the action and will likely not give in. Sasae said he fears a very bad public reaction. The episode could do tremendous damage to the bilateral relationship that will take a long time to repair.

14. (C) Japan wants to maintain a rational stance, Sasae continued, but it feels it must respond to ROK actions. Japan does not want bilateral relations shaken at a time when the North Korean situation requires bilateral cooperation and collaboration, but the ROK Government is not listening.

Consequently, Japan is seeking U.S. Government understanding of Japan's position. Japan had remained silent and hoped for a rational ROKG decision, he reiterated, but that approach had not worked.

15. (C) Earlier that afternoon, Sasae recounted, he had told ROK Ambassador Ra that it would be "a mistake" for the ROKG to send the survey vessel into the disputed area, and that such an act would create "quite a strong reaction." The ROKG has to understand that Japan cannot sit back without registering its own protest, he repeated.

16. (C) The Charge responded that he would convey DG Sasae's message to Washington. He said that we appreciated the restraint that Japan has shown to date. He strongly encouraged Japan to continue that restraint and to look for ways for both sides to show flexibility in managing the issue.
DONOVAN